POISONED PETS | PET FOOD SAFETY NEWS

From Stable to Table: Horses Turned into Pet Food & Their Bones Sold as Dog Chews. In America. Right Now.

There have only been a few times in my career as a pet food safety advocate where I stood paralyzed – frozen in horror – when I witnessed something so terrible it was beyond my comprehension that such brutality against animals could exist.

It was during the testimony of a whistleblower who recounted his experience at a place called Bravo Packing in New Jersey, a place he described as a "rat hole."

Then he showed me the photographs of the animals at Bravo Packing.

Images of dead horses piled in a tangled mess of heads and legs, their manes soaked in blood. Emaciated horses and ones too weak to stand, starving. Cows crippled with pain, unable to stand, their flesh torn from their bodies, their bones broken by forklifts, lying in blood and filth. I was shown barrels of decomposing intestines of euthanized animals crawling with maggots. Images so brutal, so terrible, that I struggled with whether to make them public. *(shown below)*

And all these animals and their remains were destined to become pet food.

Even harder to believe was that the horses at Bravo are processed into pet food, their flesh ground into horsemeat, their bones sold a dog chews, and their hides sold for zoos for exotic animals to play with.

A WHISTLEBLOWER'S REPORT

As soon as the whistleblower informed me of the conditions at Bravo, I immediately reported the matter to the relevant state department of agriculture feed control officials and I wrote about the conditions at Bravo Packing. Within days an FDA review was initiated, and the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine immediately stopped disposing of euthanized animals at Bravo Packing.

A CRUEL TRADE

Aside from the obvious ethical objections of the slaughter of horses and the manufacture of pet food made of horsemeat, Bravo Packing claims that its equine meat is "from USDA inspected plants, " when in reality, the horses used in Bravo's animal diets are slaughtered on their premises. And the horses used to make their raw pet food is made from dead, dying and diseased horses. Worse, there is evidence that the horses at Bravo are kept in inhumane conditions for an indeterminate amount of time – without food – until which time their body condition has the lean quality that the owner of Bravo prefers to use in its pet food formulas.

It's only when the owner of Bravo wants "fresh meat" that he decides that one of his horses or other animal are to be picked off with a .22 rifle. If the shooter misses, which they often do, they keep shooting until the animal is eventually killed. And they do the killing in front of the other animals, oblivious to the animal's cries of terror and pain.

Although state and federal animal welfare laws require that a suffering animal to be humanely euthanized, and sick, elderly horses are to be euthanized by a licensed veterinarian, that's not what happens at Bravo Packing. At Bravo, horses are slaughtered, not humanely euthanized.

And when a dead horse is brought to Bravo, there is a likelihood that the horse may have been euthanized with pentobarbital.

THE DEADLY DRUG

In a recent FDA announcement, when the agency warned consumers about bacteria-laden pet food discovered at Bravo Packing a note about an inspection at Bravo Packing in 2016 caught my attention. It said that the agency had collected samples of Bravo Packing horse meat chunk animal food that "tested positive for the drugs pentobarbital and phenytoin."

According to Phyllis Entis of eFoodAlert, the FDA "analyzed a sample of horse meat pursuant to a complaint from one Bravo Packing's customers. According to the complaint, four exotic cats fell ill after being fed the meat. Two of the animals had to be euthanized. The sample of horse meat, as well as a pre-euthanasia blood sample from one of the animals, tested positive for pentobarbital."

However, it is unclear why a recall for the horse meat chunk animal food was never initiated.

A DEADLY DINNER

In addition to the risk of pentobarbital, there is another reason that horsemeat poses a severe risk to human health (and presumably animal health as well) if they consume it. A study published in May 2010 in the journal Food and Chemical Toxicology found that substances routinely given to American horses cause dangerous adverse effects in humans. One commonly used anti-inflammatory drug, phenylbutazone (bute), can be lethal if ingested by people. The National Toxicology Program has determined that bute is a carcinogen. For these reasons, the FDA bans this substance for human consumption. But what we can't be certain of is that Bravo Packing takes any precaution that the horses he uses to make food for animals are not contaminated with lethal drugs – of any kind.

THE LOOPHOLE

Bravo Packing takes advantage of a little known loophole in the law against the slaughter of horses, in which the practice is perfectly legal as long as the horses he slaughters are going to be used as pet food or animal feed. And Bravo is able to circumvent the laws preventing the practice of transporting horses, holding them, or selling their flesh as long as they are in the business of making food for animals, not humans.

A LAWLESS LAND

Remarkably, there isn't a law preventing the sale or manufacture of horsemeat for animal consumption anywhere in the U.S. And even the Association of Animal Feed Control Officials does not explicitly forbid the use of horsemeat in pet food or animal feed, because the definitions that apply to animal products refer to non-species specific slaughtered "mammal" tissues.

Although horses were commonly used in pet food years ago, it fell out of favor when the public began to think of horses as domestic pets rather than beasts of burden. Today, no pet food or animal feed company of any repute would dare use or list horsemeat as an ingredient.

THE HORSE SLAUGHTER ACT

There was a time where the practice of slaughtering horses could have been halted by a law forbidding it in the State of New Jersey where Bravo Packing is located, but it didn't work out that way.

In 2012, Governor Christie of New Jersey signed a bill into law prohibiting the slaughter of horses and sale of horseflesh for human consumption. Because what that bill didn't ban was the slaughter of horses and sale of horseflesh for animal consumption. Read how the law omits the reference to food for animal consumption: *(emphasis mine)*

> ***New Jersey Statutes Annotated. Title 4. Agriculture and Domestic Animals. Chapter 22. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Article 2. Prevention of Cruelty. B. Misdemeanors and Fines. 4:22-25.5. Prohibition upon slaughter of horses for human consumption;***

punishment.

Summary: This New Jersey law enacted in 2012 makes it a disorderly persons offense to knowingly slaughter a horse for human consumption. Additionally, it makes the knowing sale or barter of horseflesh for human consumption a disorderly persons offense. Violation incurs a fine of not less than $100 and a term of imprisonment of not less than 30 days.

NJSA 4:22-10 to 4:22-60; NJSA 2C:33-31 – 3, 4:22-26. Acts constituting cruelty in general; penalty

Chapter 22. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

y. (1) Knowingly sell or barter, or offer for sale or barter, at wholesale or retail, for human consumption, the flesh of a domestic dog or cat, or any product made in whole or in part from the flesh of a domestic dog or cat;

(2) Knowingly slaughter a horse for human consumption;

(3) Knowingly sell or barter, or offer for sale or barter, at wholesale or retail, for human consumption, the flesh of a horse, or any product made in whole or in part from the flesh of a horse, or knowingly accept or publish newspaper advertising that includes the offering for sale, trade, or distribution of any such item for human consumption;

(4) Knowingly transport a horse for the purpose of slaughter for human consumption;

(5) Knowingly transport horsemeat, or any product made in whole or in part from the flesh of a horse, for the purpose of human consumption;

THE HORSE SLAUGHTER BILL THAT WON'T WORK

In an effort safeguard human food and to protect horses, a bill was introduced this year into Congress on June 27, 2019, called the Safeguard American Food Exports (SAFE) Act of 2019 which would prohibit the slaughter of horses in the United States for human consumption, as well as the export of live horses for the same purpose. It hasn't passed yet, but there is hope that it will. But unfortunately, even if it should, it won't prevent Bravo from continuing its terrible trade.

Read more: *(emphasis mine)*

> ***The bill would amend Chapter 3 of title 18, United States Code, by adding at the end the following:***
> *It shall be unlawful to knowingly—*
> *(1)possess, ship, transport, purchase, sell, deliver, or receive, in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce, any horse with the intent that it is to be slaughtered for human consumption; or*
> *(2)possess, ship, transport, purchase, sell, deliver, or receive, in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce, any horse flesh or carcass or part of a carcass, with the intent that it is to be used for human consumption.*

In a curious twist, U.S. Senator Bob Menendez, a Democrat from the State of New Jersey, the home to Bravo Packing, who is one of the sponsors of the bill, said:

> *"The gruesome practice of slaughtering horses for food has no place in the United States, and it's well past time for Congress to say once and for all that horsemeat is not what's for dinner," said Sen. Menendez, a regular recipient of the annual Humane Society's Humane Champion award. "Horses are routinely treated with drugs that are dangerous for human consumption and do not belong in our nation's nation's food supply. Our bipartisan legislation will help put an end to the cruel and inhumane slaughter of horses while protecting families from toxic horse meat and safeguarding the reputation of the U.S. food industry worldwide."*

And Sen. Menendez worked to ban horsemeat by defunding federally required meat inspections by the U.S. Department of Agriculture at slaughterhouses where horses are sent, which would effectively prohibit slaughter plants from killing horses. But Bravo Packing is not an official establishment under USDA rule, so they are able to continue to slaughter horses.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPECIESISM

Horses have always played a vital role in the collective experience of America and that they richly deserve our protection and compassion. Yet, the compassion they deserve is no more than any other animal should have the privilege of because all animals deserve that right.

But in our culture, we don't have the same compassion and empathy for livestock that we do for horses because the sole purpose of livestock is to be born and bred, to live and die so that humans can dine on their flesh. We marginalize the experience and suffering of cows, pigs, and chickens while we shower our love and affection on our pets, including our horses. To allow the suffering of pets is unthinkable, yet we allow the systemic abuse and neglect of livestock to continue on a scale that is unimaginable.

It is easy to denounce our lack of morality and character for singling out one species suffering as more significant than another, revering one and eating the other.

But to be ignorant of the sentient lives of animals is to ignore the responsibility, each one of us has to demand better treatment of the animals we raise to be food. I hope someday we will see that all animals should be treated – and loved – equally.

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Mollie Morrissette, is the author and founder of Poisoned Pets, the independent, online journal in the critically under-reported area of pet food safety.

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